

Gestus

*I had wondered...what was holding the universe
from cracking in pieces and falling apart.
It is places like this monastery....*

-Thomas Merton

*...a choice made now, today, projects itself
backwards and changes our past....*

-Czeslaw Milosz

only Brother Raphael—
in the cheese barn since 1954
when he entered at 32
now guestmaster—
knows my name
forgets it soon after
he shows me to my room
#205
no reputation or relationship
to moor me

I am a fish
whose tail and joy
have hurled it ashore
flailing, rubbery
gills fan up
slum
slower, slower
it realizes
breathe in
arches
scales sprout thin roots
it rises, slides
among the alien trees
that smile at the sun
and tuck her to themselves

a grave 4 feet
from where I've set
the coffee cup—

true peace in drinking
near men now soil
in a stillness made of bones

a small leaf drops—
let no thought
hold it in the air

light & leaf
the garden floor
rustle scrabble scratch song
sounds braiding collapsing clinging
snap of wing
claws on bark—
my ear reaches to receive something
long forgotten
never absent
leisurely awakened
I sit being quietly eaten
by this energy

too much is made of finding
being found—
freedom in being lost
at last
without anchor
aim
or purpose

shadow-striped wall
a slight breeze—
the wall sways
the shadows stay

a wide path gives to a view
of urgently ripening hills
& a vast parquetry

of fields and pasturage
I hear a sound
slightly more prolonged
than the crack of a jawbone
at its hinges
follow the rhythm—
a cypress has died
& in its slow rot
has started to topple
only to be stopped
in its sideways keel
by another tree
green & keenly alive
the one-note squeal
is the dead tree swooning
against the upright one

breakfast coffee in Tim's cup—
I bring him to my lips
this way

a door clasp
a wasp on the path—
gradually desire loses its appetite
for itself—
an eaten leaf
knee-high wheat—
the sense-seeking mind drops
to an unheard pitch—
flowers nursing at the breasts of a hill
4 orange moths
close & open their wings
on a thin skin of mud
a web spun between the limbs
of two pine boughs
caught to it
a small dry leaf—
far off an owl hoots

door slams
an exit
an entrance
no matter—
either creates the same
sound & motion

Notre Dame de Melleray, France:
after 8 centuries
only so many plots
in the burial yard—
when a monk dies
the oldest grave at the time
is opened
the remains are gathered
& placed in a small box
which is used to cradle the head
of his unknown brother

take my ancient body
eat hip & limb & puckering brow
vein & palm & bellyplane—
eat earth whole
clean & radiant in readiness
be freely eaten
your bloodloam washing words
over bones of white joy

yellowing leaves of a sapling
move whole
all at once—
in a hundred years
someone will be writing
of a width
I shall never see

slow susurrations
of low-pitched Psalms

sung at Compline
draw us deeper into the night—
eyes on the sanctuary candle
in its clear glass holder:
body heavy in itself
mind muttering endlessly to itself
fidgety flame morrow to dark wick
eye to flame to eye to flame
being received
taking in
received
receiving
taking taken

an eldermonk
walks the cemetery perimeter
I rise to leave
he turns
looks straight to my eyes
says *Stay right where you are*
entirely
swings half a circle away from
disappears through an open door

a scatterbrained rain blows in
on a hijacked carousel
flinging moist coins
to the flowers of children
with cherished hair
laughs before the ark of the sun
& her warrior daughter

before science
psychology
prayer—
water
dawn
the willow

long shawls of shadows unroll
over the hills' shoulders
fields furrowed like Zen gardens
& hazed with the dying day's heat
air aflame with spice
of earth's cycle
finches scatter overhead
beneath a skyspread of truest blue:
a geometry of timelessness—
I walk among the well-tended dead
as casually as I roam with the living
who carry a book or nothing
or coffee in a white cup
shabby bricks of monastery buildings
beckon with a welcome as fresh
as their mortar once was

beneath what I have seen
far beneath the words I have written
or spoken or read
beneath the listening
is a tinder that ignites:
I have place
as surely as do the sun
drowning in its own water
of fabulous color
or the woods' wild perfume
or the humidity that cloaks—
alone
I have place
with others
I have place
& proceeding from this place
I continue to be created
the ineffable is resident
in every step
breath
& mouthful of food
I have taken
there is no existence apart
from this

Amma:
meet us
in the breath we breathe
which is you
destroy what is merciless
seize us—
we offer straw and dross
receive them in fullness
as your own true blood
& bread
& face

*There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity,
a hidden wholeness. This mysterious Unity and Integrity
is Wisdom, the Mother of all, natura naturans.*

— Thomas Merton

Rusty C. Moe

* a sequence of poems written while on retreat at the Abbey
of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Trappist, Kentucky